The New Standard

—"I know it hurts sometimes, but you'll get over it

You'll find another life to live."

Oh Wonder - Landslide

The morning started with silence. The one that sat in the chest like a stone and made the air feel thicker than air had any right to be. Bangkok was half-empty. The Chinese New Year—the annual, massive, culturally mandated migration of millions of people from the capital back to hometowns and family reunions. The usual roar of the city had been reduced to a murmur. The traffic was thinned. The streets were quieter. The air carried the faint, residual smell of firecrackers and red paper and the specific sweetness of orange offerings left at shrines.

The city felt like a theater between performances—the lights still on, the seats empty, the stage waiting.

Est was in his kitchen. Making coffee. Black.

He stood at the counter in a black t-shirt and gray sweatpants, His feet were bare on the cool tile. His hair was uncombed. He looked exactly like what he was: a twenty-four-year-old man who had woken up without an alarm and who had no intention of engaging with any reality beyond the one contained within these soundproofed walls.

His phone was on the counter. Face down.

He had watched the clip once. Last night. The same clip Lego had shown him on the rooftop—Milo's face on the split screen, the young voice cracking with anger.

"Where is the place, Kai? Your other streams where you play the victim? The interviews where you hint that he abandoned you? When is the place—"

One million people had watched Milo defend him.

One million people now had an opinion about his life.

Est drank the espresso. It was hot. It burned the roof of his mouth. He let it burn.

The buzzer sounded.

Nobody buzzed at 7:48 AM. The building's concierge handled packages. Nobody came to the door at 7:48 AM unless—Unless it was urgent.

Est pressed the intercom. The screen showed the building's lobby camera.

Dana. In the lobby. Her tablet under her arm, her hair pulled back, tension that Est

had seen exactly three times in their professional relationship. Each of those three times had preceded a crisis that required dismantling and rebuilding something fundamental.

Behind her—Hong.

Hong.

In the lobby. At 7:48 AM.

Wearing a black hoodie that was too big for him—the hood up, the sleeves pulled over his hands, the posture of a person who had gotten dressed in the dark and who had not cared which clothes he grabbed because the clothes were irrelevant. The showing up was the thing.

Est buzzed them up.

The elevator arrived. The door opened. Dana entered first.

"Good morning." Dana said. The words were professional. The eyes were not. The eyes said: we have a problem, and the problem is bigger than the last problem, and the last problem was already big.

Hong followed. He stepped into the apartment the way he had stepped onto every rooftop and into every backstage and through every door that Est had seen him approach. But the energy was dimmer this morning. The edges were softer. The gray hair under the hood was flat, uncombed, the chemical silver dulled by sleep and shower and the specific, early-morning weariness of someone who had been called away from rest to deal with crisis.

"P'Est." Hong said. The greeting was flat. Tired.

"It's 7:48 in the morning." Est said.

"I know."

"You hate mornings."

"I hate a lot of things," Hong said. "Mornings are near the top of the list. But—" He gestured at Dana, at the tablet, at the situation. "This couldn't wait."

"You look terrible." Hong said.

Est looked at him. "You're the one wearing a hoodie that looks like it came from a dumpster."

"Fair point." Hong moved past him into the apartment. He looked around—the dark furniture, the minimal decoration, the soundproofed walls. "Nice place. Very you."

Dana cleared her throat. The sound cut through the banter.

"What happened?" Est asked. He already knew. He had watched the clip. He had seen the number climbing.

"The clip went viral," Dana said. She opened the tablet. The screen displayed a graph. A line moving upward. Exponentially. "Milo's confrontation with Kai. It's been viewed one million times since last night."

"How many comments?" Est asked, though he wasn't sure why he was asking. The number would be large. The comments would be cruel. This was the internet's natural response to a person in pain—to extract the pain, analyze it, weaponize it, and distribute it for consumption.

"The discourse has shifted from the scandal itself to analysis of your relationship. People are pulling every public appearance you and Kai ever made together. Every interview. Every red carpet. They're doing frame-by-frame analysis of your facial expressions, looking for—" She paused. The pause was deliberate. The pause allowed a moment for Est to prepare himself for the next sentence. "—signs. Signs of what they're calling 'emotional absence.' Signs that Kai was 'begging for connection' while you were 'performing coldness.'"

Est looked at the tablet. The screen showed a freeze-frame from a red carpet event in New York—Est and Kai side by side. Kai's hand on Est's arm. Kai's smile directed at the cameras. Est's face in three-quarter profile, his expression the professional, camera-ready, the mask that he had worn for three years.

The image had been annotated by strangers.

Arrows pointing to the space between their bodies: "the distance says everything".

A comment in the margin: "this is what emotional abuse looks like".

Another: "no wonder Kai left".

Another: "cold people don't deserve love".

"It's a disaster." Est said. The words tasted like metal.

"It's a situation," Dana corrected. "Situations have solutions."

"They're analyzing my face, Dana. They're looking at photographs of me standing next to a person who cheated on me and they're concluding that I'm the one who was absent. That I'm the one who failed to connect."

"Which is exactly why we need to act now," Dana said. She moved to the sofa. Sat beside Est. "The agency isn't trying to cover up the scandal, Est. They're trying to start over. To separate you from Kai. From the old narrative. From the version of you

that the internet constructed without your permission."

"Can you separate someone from their own face?" Est asked.

"You can give them a new context for the face," Dana said. "But we can fix it. No—I'm going to fix it. I won't let an ex who plays the victim ruin your career."

Est looked at her. At the composure. At the determination in her jaw. Dana meant it. She would dismantle narratives. She would rebuild them. She would fight the internet with strategy and steel and the specific, unflinching commitment of a person who had decided that one of her people was worth protecting.

"How?" Est asked.

"A shoot," Dana said. She consulted her tablet, scrolling through a brief that had been written, revised, and approved in the hours between midnight and dawn. She found the line. Read it aloud. "Formal. Structural. The brief uses words like 'untouchable' and 'elevated' and 'definitive.'"

"They want us in suits," Hong said. He had been quiet. "They want you in very expensive suits looking like the kind of men that the internet can't touch, I guess I won't have a New Year's holiday then." Hong said. "Let's break the internet with something new," His voice had shifted. It turned harder. "Something so beautiful, so technically perfect, so undeniably excellent that when people see it, they won't be able to see anything else. We give them something better to look at. The internet moves on when something better appears."

"Is that what we do now?" Est asked. "We move the internet around like furniture? We redirect the attention like it's a search engine? We perform and they watch and we call it control?"

"No," Dana said quietly. "But it's better than the alternative. Which is silence. Which is letting other people define who you are. Which is letting Kai's narrative become the only narrative. Is that what you want?"

Est looked at the freeze-frame on the tablet. The annotated version. The internet's interpretation of his face, his body, his heart. "No." he said.

"Then we do this," Dana said. "We create something so good that it becomes the image people see when they think of you. Not the red carpet. Not the analysis. This. This new thing. This new context."

Est set down his espresso cup. "Then we'd better move."

Everything happened fast after that. Dana drove. Est sat in the front seat. Hong sat in the back, his hood still up, his body taking up as little space as possible. The city

scrolled past. Red lanterns hung from shopfronts—the new decorations replacing the old. The Valentine's hearts were gone. The Chinese New Year red was arriving. The city was cycling through its celebrations the way a theater cycles through its shows.

"The creative director," Dana said, navigating traffic that was lighter than usual. "She's excellent. She's demanding, but excellent. She has specific ideas about what she wants. The brief keeps using the word 'opposition.' Light and dark. Formal and rebellious. Connected and distant."

"So they want us to be the opposite of what the internet thinks we are." Est said.

"They want you to be undeniable," Dana said. "They want the photos to be so good, so perfectly composed, so technically and aesthetically flawless that when people see them, they won't be able to see anything else. The internet moves on when something better appears. We're going to give them something better. Something that becomes the new image. The new story."

"That's a lot of pressure." Hong said from the back seat.

"That's why they're paying you very well." Dana said.

The lobby was quieter than usual. P'Kwan was waiting at the elevator. Hong's manager.

"Hong," P'Kwan said. "You're late."

"It's 8:30. You said 8:30."

"You should have been here at 8:15."

"Why? What happens in those five minutes?"

"Preparation takes time," P'Kwan said. "Energy preparation. Mental preparation. The kind of preparation that keeps you from looking like you've been dragged out of bed by a crisis."

P'Kwan and Dana walked ahead. Their conversation was rapid, overlapping, the two managers operating in the frequency that managers shared. Est caught fragments.

"—the brief has been rewritten twice since midnight—"

"—the creative director wants 'distant intimacy,' whatever that means—"

"—I've already flagged the body-usage clauses, we're not letting them do anything that contradicts—"

"—agreed, nothing that commodifies physical contact, nothing that implies a romantic relationship unless both clients explicitly consent—"

"—agreed."

Hong fell into step beside Est.

"You okay?" Hong asked. Low. Under the managers' conversation.

"Define okay."

"Vertical. Breathing. Not currently on fire."

"Then yes."

"Good," Hong said. He searched for the word. "We're going to be the foundation and the façade and the thing the cameras see, and the thing underneath—the actual us, the tired, undercaffeinated us, the real us—that part is irrelevant to them. They only want the surface."

"It's always been irrelevant to them." Est said.

"Yeah," Hong said. "But today it's going to feel more irrelevant than usual. So. Just —" He paused. The request arriving gently. "Stay with me in there. I'll stay with you. We do this together."

"Okay," Est said.

"Okay." Hong said.

They reached the studio. Inside was chaos.

The studio occupied the entire seventh floor—a vast, open space with concrete floors and industrial ceilings and the kind of lighting rig that could illuminate a football field or, in this case, two men in expensive suits.

The space was still being assembled.

Lighting technicians were bolting C-stands to the floor. A backdrop—enormous, matte black, the darkness so absolute it looked like a hole in the wall. Cables snaked across the floor in every direction, the black cords creating a labyrinth that the moving bodies navigated with the unconscious expertise of people who had tripped enough times to learn the map.

The smell hit Est first. Hairspray. Strong. Artificial.

The hair and makeup stations were set up near the entrance—two chairs, two mirrors. The mirrors were close enough that Est could see Hong's reflection and Hong could see his, the proximity creating a claustrophobic intimacy that was not accidental. Two makeup artists were already waiting, their kits open. The arsenal of transformation. Brushes organized by size. Palettes arranged by color. Everything prepared. Everything ready.

The suits arrived on a rolling rack. Two garment bags. The stylist unzipped the first bag.

The suit emerged. Charcoal gray. Silver pinstripes. The shirt was white but cold, the kind of white that suggested distance and precision. The tie was narrow, dark, precise. The shoes were Italian leather. The pocket square was silk.

The second suit: black velvet.

Hong's.

Gold embroidery traced the lapels. The hardware was gold—buttons, cufflinks, tie bar—heavy, deliberate, the weight of it visible even on the hanger.

"The contrast is intentional." Dana said.

"Everything is intentional," Est said. "That's the problem. Nothing is natural. Everything is calculated. Everything is designed to communicate something. There's no truth in any of this."

"No," Dana said. "But there's power. And power is what we need today."

"I hate the color," Hong said, running his fingers over the gold embroidery. His silver rings caught the studio lights and threw reflections onto the black velvet. "Gold. Really? I look like a funeral decoration. I look like something designed to be displayed in a casket."

"You look like someone the internet can't ignore," Dana said. "That was already true. Now it will be true in a way that sells products."

"So we're here to sell products," Hong said. "Not to tell the truth. Not to defend ourselves. To sell products."

"We're here to control the narrative," P'Kwan said, appearing beside them. "The narrative controls everything. The narrative is the truth, as far as the internet is concerned. So we give them a narrative so good that it becomes the truth."

They changed. The process was efficient and invasive. Stylists adjusting lapels and hemlines and the precise angle of a pocket square. A producer with a clipboard checked items off a list. A lighting technician called out measurements. The air itself felt compressed, heavy with intention. The makeup came off in layers. New makeup went on in different layers. The transformation was methodical. Systematic. Designed.

The stylist frowned at Hong.

"The rings clash with the gold hardware." the stylist said.

"The rings stay," Hong said.

"The brief specifically—"

"The rings. Stay." Hong's voice was flat. Non-negotiable.

The stylist looked at the creative director. The creative director—looked at P'Kwan. P'Kwan looked at Hong. "The rings stay." P'Kwan said.

"Thank you." Hong said.

"I didn't do it for you," P'Kwan said. "I did it because rings are the only thing keeping you from looking like a department store mannequin. The rings are the rebellion. The rings are the proof that there's a person underneath the suit."

"Cheerful." Hong said.

The photographer arrived. The famous one. The one whose work had appeared in magazines that Est read in waiting rooms and that dictated the visual language of the entire industry.

Four hours.

Four hours during which Est and Hong performed their roles. But somewhere around hour two, something shifted. The performance became less about performing and more about being. The exhaustion, the anger, the specific, bone-deep weariness of a person who had been judged by strangers his entire adult life—it became visible. Not as weakness. But as truth.

The camera caught it.

Click. Click. Click.

The shutter sounded again and again. The light moved across their faces. The shadows deepened and shifted. Between setups, while the lighting was being adjusted, Hong sat on the edge of the set and pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?" Est asked.

"Texting Lego."

"About?"

"Lunch. Today. At his place." Hong typed with his thumbs, the silver rings clicking against the screen. "When all this is over, we're going to Lego's house. We're supposed to have dinner to celebrate that we all have a day off." He looked up from the phone. His expression was tired, but his eyes held something that the tired couldn't reach. "No complaining." he said.

"I wasn't going to complain."

"You absolutely were going to complain. Your face gets this specific shape when you're about to complain about something being inconvenient or emotionally demanding or requiring you to feel a feeling."

"That's not fair."

"It's extremely fair. And accurate. And endearing, actually. Because you do it anyway. You complain and then you show up. That's your brand—reluctant but present."

The photographer called them back.

Click. Click. Click.

At noon, it was done. The contact sheet was approved. Dana looked at the images. Even P'Kwan—who never approved of anything—nodded.

"It's good," P'Kwan said. "It's very good. Better than good. It's the image they'll see when they think about this scandal a month from now. It's the image that buries everything else."

"People will move on," Dana said. "Something new will arrive. But for now—this is the image they see. This is what they remember."

Est put on his own clothes. The black t-shirt. The sweatpants. The shoes that were his shoes. The turtleneck he'd brought in a bag—he pulled it on over the t-shirt, the familiar collar touching his throat, the fabric saying mine in the language that fabric spoke to people who needed ownership to feel real.

Hong emerged from the adjacent area. Back in the black hoodie. Back in the jeans. The silver rings, where they belonged. The gold embroidery and the velvet blazer hung on the rack behind him like a shed skin.

They looked at each other.

Two people who had been statues for four hours. Now people again.

The eye contact lasted three seconds.

"Let's get out of here." Hong said.

Dana drove. The car was quiet. The engine hummed. The city moved past. Red lanterns. The smell of firecrackers and sweetness and celebration.

"Dana." Est said.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you. For this morning. For being there at 7:48."

"It's my job."

"It's more than your job."

In the back seat, Hong opened one eye.

"Is someone being sentimental up there? Because I can hear sentimentality and it's making me uncomfortable. Please stop being emotional in my presence."

"Go back to sleep, Hong." Dana said.

"I wasn't sleeping. I was contemplating the void. Which is a very important activity and should not be interrupted by feelings."

"Contemplate quieter."

Dana pulled up to Lego's building. The structure announced itself immediately. A high-rise. Expensive. Est wasn't surprised. After seeing Lego's clothes—the Miu Miu, the platforms, the accessories that appeared and disappeared with the daily regularity of a fashion show—after seeing the way Lego moved through spaces with the unconscious ease of a person who had been trained from childhood in the language of luxury, it had been clear that Lego had money.

The building confirmed what the wardrobe had implied.

Dana stayed in the car.

"Dana," Hong said, leaning down to the driver's window. "Thank you for not being terrible today. And for the crisis management. And for showing up at 7:48 in the morning looking like you had a plan, because that plan was what made everything less terrifying."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." Dana said.

"Don't get used to it."

The elevator ascended. The ambient music played. Hong leaned against the elevator wall, his hoodie hood still up. The doors opened.

The apartment door was ajar—the gap releasing warm air that carried the smell of garlic and basil and sesame oil and something sweet baking. The smell of care. The smell of someone who had spent the entire afternoon in preparation.

Lego met them at the door. He was wearing a gray-and-white Miu Miu dress that fell to mid-calf. Expensive shoes—low-heeled, leather, the kind that clicked on marble

floors and that had been chosen, Est suspected, because the clicking was a sound that Lego enjoyed making. His hair was in a high bun held together with metal sticks—silver, decorative. His makeup was light but precise. The natural look that took hours to achieve.

"P'Hong!" Lego's face transformed.

The smile arrived complete. Unguarded. Real. He threw himself forward. Hong caught him. Lego's arms wrapped around Hong's waist, pulling him close. Lego pulled back. Looked at Hong's face.

"You look tired." Lego said. Softly. With the specific tenderness that Lego reserved for people he loved and who were hurting.

"I was a weapon all morning," Hong said. "Weapons don't rest."

"You're not a weapon. You're a person wearing a terrible hoodie." Lego smoothed the hoodie's wrinkled shoulder with his palm. "Come in. Food's almost ready. P'Est —" He turned to Est. "Welcome!" Lego reached for Est's arm—touch landing just above the wrist, the contact brief and warm and gone before Est could decide whether to resist it. The gesture was small but deliberate. "Come. Everyone's here."

The apartment unfolded around them as they entered.

The high ceilings. The controlled chaos. The aerial hoop hanging from its rigging, the crash mat underneath, the wall of polaroids glowing in the afternoon light that poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The living room was cluttered with the evidence of someone who had been cooking all morning. The kitchen was in active production. Pots. Pans. The careful arrangement of ingredients. The specific organization that came from planning, from intention, from care. Pots on the stove—two of them. The steam rising. The smells combining. The sound of something sizzling.

The balcony. Where the others were.

Est stood in the doorway between the living room and the balcony and saw them before they saw him.

Nut was leaning against the railing with a beer in his hand. He was wearing a soft white henley with the sleeves pushed up, dark joggers, house slippers. His expression was calm, present.

Tui was beside him, also holding a beer, his body angled toward the sky. He was wearing a faded olive jacket over a black t-shirt, secondhand jeans, the earth-toned layers that constituted his aesthetic.

William was sitting in one of Lego's balcony chairs—the one furthest from the door, the one that offered the widest view and the most privacy. He was wearing a cream-

colored knit sweater over a white t-shirt, beige trousers, the earth-toned armor that was his signature. The clean and careful wardrobe.

They were talking.

The three of them. The conversation was animated. Nut's steady bass. Tui's warm gravel. William's quieter contributions arriving between the others' sentences like punctuation marks. The rhythm of three people who had known each other long enough to speak without stepping on each other's words.

Est stood in the doorway and felt—Not the guilt. Not the calculation. Not the mask. Not the performance. Not the architecture of survival that he had built so carefully over so many years. He felt—relief.

"Est!" Nut saw him first. He set his beer on the railing and moved toward the doorway. The handshake came—firm, warm, intentional—followed by, surprising Est, a brief half-hug. One arm around the shoulders. A squeeze. "Rough day?" Nut asked.

"Long one."

"Hey." William said. Low. Quiet. The single syllable carrying nothing and everything.

"Hey." Est said.

He stepped onto the balcony. Sat down in the chair beside Nut. Hong emerged onto the balcony behind him, having shed the hoodie and changed into a black sweater that Lego must have provided—the fit slightly too big in the shoulders, the fabric expensive, the garment borrowed from a closet that contained everything.

"Hong," Nut said. "You survived."

"Barely. They put me in gold. Gold, Nut. I looked like an award statue. I looked like someone's idea of what money should wear."

"You are an award statue," Nut said. "A very opinionated one. A statue that would argue with the people looking at it."

"The rings clashed," Hong said. "The gold hardware and the silver rings. It was a contradiction. It was exactly what they wanted, but I hated it."

"Of course you did. That's why you kept them," Nut said. He took his beer back from the railing. "The rings always clash. That's the point. The point is that you're not one thing. You're not gold. You're not silver. You're not the suit and you're not the rebel. You're all of it."

Lego appeared with a tray—iced tea, beer, a small bowl of sliced mango arranged in a fan pattern. He set it on the table between the chairs and settled on the balcony floor, his back against Hong's legs, the Miu Miu dress pooling around him like fabric

poured from a height.

"Nobody is allowed to be sad for the next four hours," Lego announced. "That's the rule."

"Since when do you make rules?" Hong asked, his hand going automatically to Lego's hair—finding the edge of the bun, touching the metal sticks, the contact unconscious and tender.

"Since I'm the one who's been cooking all afternoon while you were being golden statues," Lego said. He tilted his head back against Hong's knee. "And since I decided that today was a day where we all get to be people and not products. Rules are: eat, drink, watch the sky, don't talk about the internet. Those are the rules."

"What if the internet talks about us?" Hong asked.

"Then the internet can talk to itself." Lego said.

Nut and Tui drank beer. The conversation between them was low, easy.

"The museum has an exhibit called 'Human Structures,'" Nut said. "It's controversial because it's using real bodies—plastinated bodies. People think it's ghoulish. But I think it's the most honest thing in the world. The body, exposed. The structure visible. Everything that usually stays hidden, now visible."

"You want to look at corpses for professional development." Tui said.

"I want to look at anatomy in a way that respects it," Nut said. "I want to understand the body well enough that when I mark it with a tattoo, I'm not just making a mark. I'm participating in the body's story. I'm honoring its structure. That requires understanding."

"The difference between that and looking at corpses for fun is—"

"Intention," Nut said. "The difference is intent."

"Same thing," Tui said. He raised his beer. Nut raised his. They clinked. The sound of glass on glass. Small. Clean. Real.

Hong smoked. Est joined him.

They stood at the railing, the smoke rising into the violet air, the nicotine doing its work, settling the nerves, providing the small chemical comfort that both of them had decided they needed today.

"The photos are going to be incredible." Hong said.

"The photos are going to bury the scandal," Est said. "Is that what you mean?"

"I mean the photos are going to be so good that when people think about you, they won't think about Kai's narrative. They'll think about the image. The look. The specific, undeniable presence that was captured."

"For forty-eight hours," Est said. "After that, something else will come. Something new. The internet will move on."

"Yes," Hong said. "But the photos will still exist. The image will still exist. You'll still exist. And we'll still be here. Even when the internet moves on. Even when the photos are forgotten. Even when 'Untouchable' becomes a footnote. We'll be here."

Lego was on William's lap. Sideways. His feet passing over William's legs and resting on the arm of the chair. The position was casual, natural.

And William—William was handsome, Est noticed. The thought arrived without permission—slipping past the filters, past the exhaustion, past the strategic, performance-based way that Est usually assessed other people.

The dark hair falling slightly over the forehead. The careful skin—clear, luminous, the result of a routine that Est could see the evidence of without knowing the details. The concentration on his face as he looked through the viewfinder. The way his hands held the camera—gently. Like it was a person rather than a device. Like the camera was something to be treated with reverence rather than used for simple documentation.

He was beautiful. Not in the way that could be turned into product. But in the way that mattered—real, specific, earned through the accumulation of small choices and small kindnesses. And William was quiet. Quieter than the others. The kind of quiet that came from having learned early that silence was safety. That observation was protection. That the person behind the lens didn't have to be visible, didn't have to be vulnerable, could remain in the margins and still participate.

Lego's voice broke through the observations.

"Okay! Food! The pad see ew waits for no man! And I made brownies. Good brownies. The kind that require an apology and a compliment simultaneously!"

The brightness returned. The group moved from the balcony to the dining table.

Lego had prepared Thai dishes. Pad see ew with its dark gravy and tender beef. Tom yum with its heat and citrus and the specific complexity of Thai flavors. Pad thai with the balance of sweet and salty. Basil chicken. Sticky rice. Green papaya salad with the kick of lime and chili.

And for dessert, trifle. Even better this time. The layers more careful. The arrangement more intentional. The colors more coordinated. The trifle of someone who had spent hours considering beauty in the form of dessert. And brownies. Dark

chocolate. The kind that required patience and precision. The kind that Lego had apparently been making since dawn.

"This is really good," Hong said, his mouth full.

"You sound surprised." Lego said.

"I'm impressed. I'm impressed by your ability to transform raw ingredients into something that tastes like care."

"Don't steal William's line."

William smiled. The smile was small.

They ate. The conversation continued. Nut telling a story about a client who wanted a tattoo of their cat but wanted it to be abstract. "Abstract how?" I said. "Like Picasso?" And they said yes, but with more fur. I'm still not sure what that means." Tui laughing. The kind of laugh that came from genuine amusement rather than politeness. William photographing the steam rising from the soup. Hong reaching for the basil chicken. Lego moving between the table and the kitchen, bringing more water, checking if anyone needed anything, the role of the host coming naturally to him. The attention to other people's needs arriving without effort, without resentment, the way water moved downhill—natural, inevitable, part of the structure of who he was.

This, Est thought. This was what mattered.

Not the viral images. Not the public narrative. Not the performance or the product or the carefully calibrated responses designed to satisfy the brief. This. Six people. Eating together. Being together. Choosing to be in the same room.

After they moved to the living room.

The sofa absorbed them—Lego in the center, Hong beside him, Nut in the armchair, Tui on the floor with his back against the sofa, his legs stretched out. William in the corner of the sofa, his legs drawn up, the compact posture of someone who still, even here, even with people he knew, hadn't fully learned how to take up space.

Est on the opposite end. The distance maintained. The space between them occupied by Lego and Hong and the warmth of a room that was holding six people without asking any of them to be anything other than what they were.

Hong talked about the shoot.

"The worst part was the phrase 'devout yet strong,'" Hong said. "What does that even mean? Devout to whom? Strong how? It's like asking someone to be 'wet yet

dry.' It's a contradiction designed to confuse you into compliance."

"It's designed to make you look like someone the internet can project onto," Tui said. "That's the whole game. They give you a meaningless phrase and you fill it with something real and the camera captures the real part and sells it as the phrase. 'Devout yet strong' could mean anything. So people project their idea of 'devout' and 'strong' onto the image and they see what they want to see."

"That's the saddest thing I've ever heard." Lego said.

"It's the truest thing," Nut said quietly. "It's how they turn people into products. By asking for contradictions. By asking you to hold opposites. The body becomes a canvas that holds whatever meaning the viewer decides to project onto it."

"That's very philosophical for someone who was hit on the head by aerial silks last week," Hong said.

"I wasn't hit on the head." Nut said.

The night continued. The beers accumulated. The brownies disappeared. The music played.

Hong smoked another cigarette with Est on the balcony—the two of them standing at the railing, the smoke rising into the dark air, the silence between them comfortable, full, the silence of two people who had been through something together and who were now on the other side of it.

"What happens now?" Est asked.

"Now the photos get released. The internet sees them. The narrative shifts. People move on."

"And then?"

"Then we do this again," Hong said. "We gather. We eat. We be people. It's not dramatic. It's not high-stakes. It's just—consistent. It's choosing to show up. It's choosing to be in the same room. It's choosing each other."

"That sounds simple."

"It is simple. That's why it's hard. Because the industry wants complexity. The industry wants drama. The industry wants you to be a product that can be marketed and sold. But what we're doing here—" Hong gestured with his cigarette toward the apartment, toward the people inside. "This isn't a product. This is a choice. This is rebellion. This is the thing they can't commodify because it doesn't belong to them."

They finished their cigarettes. They went back inside.

The night wound down.

Tui left first. He had an early morning. He would travel to his hometown in the morning, back to Pattaya, back to the sea. He hugged Lego. "Thank you for this."

William left with Tui. The departure was quiet. William helped clean up. He washed a few dishes. He stood with Nut for a moment on the balcony. The two of them, not talking, just—being together in the dark. Then William gathered his things, put on his shoes, and said goodbye with the minimal necessary words.

But the goodbye was real.

Nut stayed longer. He helped Lego clean the kitchen. He dried the plates that Lego washed. The two of them standing side by side at the sink, their movements synchronized.

"Stay, P'Nut." Lego said. Not looking at him. Just—asking.

"Another time, cutie." Nut said. Gently.

"You always say another time."

"And another time always comes." Nut set down the plate he'd been drying. He touched Lego's shoulder. The contact light but present.

Nut left. The door closed behind him.

And then it was three.

Lego. Hong. Est.

The apartment was quieter now. The music was still playing—softer now.

"Okay," Lego said, clapping his hands together with the decisive energy of a person transitioning from host to caretaker. "Skincare."

"What?" Hong said from the sofa, where he was approximately seventy percent horizontal.

"Skincare. Both of you. You spent four hours under studio lights wearing product that was applied by someone who was not me and who therefore cannot be trusted to have used the correct formulation for your skin types."

"I don't have a skin type," Hong said. "I have a face."

"Your face has a skin type. Your skin type is 'combination leaning oily with sensitivity around the nose and jawline.' I've been telling you this for a year."

"That's... alarmingly specific."

"I'm an alarmingly specific person." Lego disappeared into the bathroom and returned with an armful of products—cleanser, toner, moisturizer, eye cream, and two sheet masks still in their packaging. "P'Est, your foundation is three shades too light. Whoever matched you this morning was working under fluorescent light, which skews blue. You need double cleansing."

"I can do my own skincare." Est said.

"Of course you can. But I can do it better. Sit."

The makeup came off in layers. The first cleanser was an oil. It dissolved the outer layer of makeup, the protection, the armor. The second cleanser was water-based. It removed the inner layer, the closer stuff, the things that had worked their way into the skin over the course of a long day.

"You have good skin," Lego said, studying Est's bare face with the frank, professional appraisal of a dermatologist. "Clear. Even. The pores are tight. You moisturize."

"I have a routine." Est said.

"I can tell. Most models don't bother. They rely on the makeup to do the work." Lego applied toner—the liquid cold on Est's face, the pat-pat-pat of Lego's fingertips distributing it evenly. The action was ritualistic. Meditative. "You do the work yourself. That's rare."

"It's not rare. It's habit."

"Habits are choices you've made so many times they forgot they were choices," Lego said. He looked at Est—the full, unmediated, look that came from being three inches away from someone without anything between you. "You look different without the makeup."

"Different how?"

"Younger. Softer." Lego peeled open the sheet mask. "Close your eyes."

Est closed his eyes. The mask settled onto his face—cool. Smooth. The sensation of being cared for. The sensation of texture changing. The sensation of something being placed between him and the world that was designed to help him, not hurt him.

"P'Hong," Lego called. "Your turn."

"I'm comfortable." Hong said from the sofa.

"You're lying on my sofa. You're not comfortable. You're avoiding self-care."

"Self-care is a marketing term."

"Self-care is a face mask and a clean t-shirt. Get over here."

Hong got over there.

The process repeated. The makeup came off. The layers revealed themselves. The bare face underneath the performance. The person underneath the Rebel. The actual human who had been performing all day and who was now, finally, allowed to rest.

They ended up in Lego's bedroom.

Lego's room was—Expensive. The bed was large—king-sized. The sheets were soft white. The room smelled of chamomile. The sheets probably cost more than all the furniture in Est's apartment combined. But the room didn't feel expensive. It felt like home. It felt like the place where someone slept and dreamed and existed without performance.

Lego changed into pajamas—soft, oversized, pink. He offered clothes to Est and Hong—clean t-shirts, sweatpants, the soft, borrowed garments of a person who wanted his friends to be comfortable.

Est changed. The black t-shirt—Lego's, too small in the shoulders but soft. The sweatpants—Lego's, with the drawstring adjusted. The sense of being held. The sense of being cared for.

They lay on the bed. The three of them. Lego in the middle. Hong on the left, his face mask still on because the mask needed time to work, his silver rings removed and placed on the bedside table, the rings sitting together like friends waiting for their owner to return. Est on the right, the chamomile smell surrounding him, the sheets cool against his arms, the pillow soft beneath his head.

Lego reached for the light.

"P'Est," Lego said into the dark. His voice was soft. "Are you okay?"

"I'm here." Est said.

"That's not the same as okay."

"It's close."

"Close counts." Lego shifted. "P'Hong?"

No answer. The answer was the sound of Hong breathing.

"He's out." Lego whispered.

"He was tired." Est said.

"He's always tired. He just doesn't usually let himself stop." Lego lay back down. "He must feel safe."

The word—safe—landed in the dark room like a small, warm thing. Like something that mattered. Est looked at the ceiling. The chamomile smell. The soft sheets. The sound of Hong breathing beside Lego, and Lego breathing beside Est, and the city breathing outside the windows. The sound of life happening. The sound of people being together.

"Lego." Est whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you. For the food. For the skincare. For the bed. For—all of it."

"You don't have to thank me for being a good person." Lego said.

"I'm thanking you anyway."

"Then you're welcome anyway."

Silence. The warm kind. The good kind. The kind that comes from people who don't need to fill it with words.

Est closed his eyes. Not everything was terrible. Not everything was the machine. Not everything was performance or product or the careful calculation of how to survive in a world that treated people like things.

Some things were soft white sheets in a room that smelled of chamomile.

He slept. And the day that had started with silence and crisis ended with warmth and care. He slept more relaxed than he had been in months. More held than he had been in years. And in the darkness, Est felt something that he had been searching for without knowing he was searching.

He felt like he belonged.